

HOW TO... Clear your surfing history

You may share your PC, but you probably don't want to share your surfing habits too. Jon Thompson shows you how to clear your browser cache to cover your tracks

Some of the facilities available in the current versions of Microsoft Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox are great time-savers. They can keep a note of login details for web forums, ensure that you can identify links you've already visited, complete URLs you've typed in before, keep track of downloaded files and much more.

But there are also bound to be times when you'd rather not have that information available to other users of your computer. It might be that you're planning a surprise, and that others discovering what you've been browsing or downloading would spoil it. It may be that people you don't necessarily trust also have access to the computer. Or perhaps you're preparing to upgrade to a new computer and you want to pass on your current one to a relative or younger member of the household.

So, along with deleting personal data stored in My Documents and other folders, you'll also need to get rid of any information stored by your web browser that could be used and abused by others. Here we'll show you how to delete all traces of your surfing and download activities, starting with Internet Explorer. Mozilla Firefox users should skip straight to Step 5.

1 In Internet Explorer, click on the Tools menu and select Internet Options. This brings up a box of controls organised into seven tabs. We're interested in the General tab. First, delete all cookies set by the web pages you've visited by pressing the Delete Cookies button. This is useful because the names of the files used to store them can give a good indication of which sites you've visited. Confirm that you want to delete them, and they will disappear.

On this tab you can also delete all your temporary internet files so that anyone browsing the folder in which they're kept cannot see which sites you've visited. Simply click on the Delete Files button and confirm. For extra privacy, the confirmation pop-up also has an option to delete the bookmarks you have saved as being available offline. Click this and they will disappear as well.

Finally, on this tab you can delete your surfing history. Obliterate this by pressing the Clear History button to delete all stored URLs.

2 Now you need to clear out your AutoComplete information. This is the data that Internet Explorer asks if you'd like to save when you complete website forms. When you next visit the relevant site, the browser will populate the forms for you along with any passwords you've asked it to save.

To clear this data, click on the Content tab and then the AutoComplete button. You'll see the options for collecting this data, along with two buttons. The first is for clearing all data that the browser will try to auto-complete for you, such as usernames, passwords and addresses. Click this and subsequent visits to web pages will leave all fields empty.

3 You can also delete the content of the temporary internet files directory whenever you close Internet Explorer. To do this, click on the Advanced tab and scroll down to the option Empty Temporary Internet Files folder when browser is closed. Click on this so that there is a tick in the associated check box. Press the OK button and close the browser. The content of the Temporary Internet Files directory will vanish every time you quit the program.

4 Internet Explorer users can also clear out individual files, including cookies and stored web pages from within the browser. This is useful when you just want to delete all information about your visits to a single website, rather than all of them. To do so, click on the General tab and then on the Settings button. Press the View Files button on the resulting box and you'll open the Temporary Internet Files folder. Select a file and press the Delete key to remove it. The files you delete here do not appear in the Recycle Bin.

5 Mozilla Firefox 1.5 users have a different – and arguably simpler – way of clearing all their personal data from the browser. From the Tools menu, you can simply select the Clear Private Data option. This gives a set of tick boxes in one place, asking what you'd like to delete.

To clear private data automatically whenever you close the browser, go to the Tools menu and select Options. On the Privacy tab, click on Settings. You will get a dialog box containing some private data options, but with another tick box to clear private data automatically.

6 There is one last task you should perform if you have downloaded any files to your computer and want to keep the fact secret. The Download Manager, which you can access by selecting Downloads from Firefox's Tools pull-down menu or by pressing the Ctrl and J keys, records all downloads but also gives the ability to open individual files to access their content. You can clear this list completely using the Clean Up button, or you can delete individual downloads from the list using the Remove button to the right of each one.

